

Special Education Continuous Improvement Continuums

INFORMATION AND ANALYSIS

	One	Two	Three	Four	Five
Approach	Data or information about student/school performance and needs are not gathered in any systematic way. The special education unit does not provide assistance in helping member schools understand what needs to change, based on data at the school and classroom levels, to serve students with disabilities.	There is no systematic process for data analysis across the unit. Some unit, district, school, teacher, and student information are collected and used to problem solve and establish student learning standards across the unit.	Special education unit collects data related to unit, district, school, and student performance (e.g., attendance, enrollment, achievement), and surveys students, staff, and parents. The information is used to drive the strategic quality plan for unit, district, and school improvement related to special education services.	There is systematic reliance on hard data (including data for subgroups) as a basis for decision making at the unit, district, school, and classroom levels. Changes are based on the study of data to meet the educational needs of students and teachers.	Information is gathered in all areas of student interaction with school. The special education unit engages administrators and teachers in gathering information on their own performance. Accessible to all districts and schools, data are comprehensive in scope and an accurate reflection of special education service quality.
Implementation	No information is gathered with which to make unit, district, school, or classroom changes. Student and parent dissatisfaction with the learning process is seen as an irritation, not a need for improvement.	Some data are tracked, such as attendance, enrollment, and drop-out rates. Only a few individuals are asked for feedback about special education unit services. Student and parent dissatisfaction with the learning process is seen as a need for improvement.	The special education unit collects information on current and former students (e.g., demographics, student achievement, and perceptions), analyzes and uses it for planning in conjunction with future trends. Identified areas for improvement are tracked over time.	Data are used to provide feedback to improve the effectiveness of teaching strategies for all students with disabilities. Students' historical performances are graphed of each school and utilized for analysis by the special education unit.	Innovative teaching processes that meet the needs of students with disabilities are implemented across the special education unit. Information is analyzed and used to prevent student failure. Root causes are known through analyses. Problems are prevented through the use of data.
Outcome	Problems are solved individually with short-term results. Only anecdotal and hypothetical information are available about the performance of students with disabilities, behavior, and satisfaction.	Little data are available. Change is limited to some areas of the special education unit and dependent upon individual staff members and their efforts.	Information collected about unit needs, effective assessment, and instructional practices is shared with all staff and is used to plan for improvement. Information helps staff understand pressing issues, analyze information for "root causes," and track results for improvement.	An information system is in place. Positive trends begin to appear unit-wide. There is evidence that these results are caused by understanding and effectively using the data collected.	Unit is satisfied with its instructional processes and proud of its own capabilities to learn and assess growth. Good to excellent achievement is the result. Unit uses data to predict and prevent potential problems. No student falls through the cracks.

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STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

	One	Two	Three	Four	Five
Approach	Instructional and organizational processes critical to the success of students with disabilities are not identified. Little distinction of student learning differences is made. Some staff believe that not all students can achieve.	Some data are collected on student background and performance trends. Learning gaps are noted to direct improvement of instruction. It is known that student learning standards must be identified.	Student learning standards are identified, and a continuum of learning is created across the special education unit. Student performance data are collected and compared to the standards in order to analyze how to improve learning for all students with disabilities.	Data on student achievement are used throughout the unit to pursue the improvement of student learning. The unit ensures that all teachers collaborate to implement appropriate instruction and assessment strategies for meeting student learning standards articulated across grade levels. All teachers believe that all students can learn.	The unit makes sure that teachers are able to predict characteristics impacting the achievement of students with varying disabilities. Teachers adjust instruction accordingly. Innovative instructional changes are made to anticipate learning needs and improve student achievement.
Implementation	All students are taught the same way. There is no communication between the unit and schools about students' academic needs or learning styles. There are no analyses of how to improve instruction for students with disabilities.	Some effort is made to track and analyze student achievement trends on a unit-wide basis. The special education unit begins to understand the needs and learning gaps within each of the unit schools.	All teachers across the unit study effective instruction and assessment strategies to implement standards and to increase learning for students with disabilities. Student feedback and analysis of disaggregated achievement data are used in conjunction with implementation support strategies.	There is a systematic focus on implementing student learning standards and on the improvement of student learning unit-wide. Effective instruction and assessment strategies are implemented in each school. The unit encourages teachers to support one another with collegial strategies that lead to increased achievement for students with disabilities.	All teachers correlate critical instructional and assessment strategies with objective indicators of quality student achievement. A comparative analysis of actual students' performance to student learning standards is utilized to adjust teaching strategies to ensure a progression of learning for all students.
Outcome	There is wide variation in student attitudes and achievement with undesirable results. There is high dissatisfaction among students with disabilities with regard to learning. Student background is used as an excuse for low student achievement.	There is some evidence that achievement trends of students with disabilities are available to schools and are being used. There is much effort, but minimal observable results in improving the achievement of students with disabilities.	There is an increase in communication between the special education unit, parents, students with disabilities, and teachers regarding student learning. Teachers learn about effective instructional strategies that will implement the shared vision, student learning standards, and methods for meeting the needs of students with disabilities. Some gains are made in student achievement results.	Increased achievement is evident unit-wide in students with disabilities. Morale, attendance, and behavior are good for students with disabilities. Teachers converse often with each other about preventing student failure. Areas for further attention are clear.	Schools and teachers conduct self-assessments to continuously improve performance related to students with disabilities. Improvements in student achievement for students with disabilities are evident and clearly caused by teachers' and students' understandings of individual student learning standards, linked to appropriate and effective instructional and assessment strategies. Students with disabilities make average yearly progress.

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QUALITY PLANNING

	One	Two	Three	Four	Five
Approach	No quality plan or process exists. Data are neither used nor considered important in planning.	The unit realizes the importance of a mission, vision, and one comprehensive action plan. The unit develops goals and timelines, and dollars are allocated to begin the planning process.	A comprehensive plan to achieve the unit vision is developed. Plan includes evaluation and continuous improvement.	One focused and integrated unit-wide plan for implementing a continuous improvement process is put into action. All unit efforts are focused on the implementation of this plan that represents the achievement of the vision.	A continuous improvement plan for the unit, with a focus on students, is put into place. There is excellent articulation and integration of all elements in the unit due to quality planning. Leadership ensures all elements are implemented by all appropriate parties.
Implementation	There is no knowledge of or direction for quality planning. Budget is allocated on an as-needed basis. Many plans exist.	The special education unit begins continuous improvement planning efforts by laying out major steps to a shared vision, through identifying values and beliefs, the purpose of the unit, a mission, and student learning standards.	Implementation goals, responsibilities, resources required, due dates, and timelines are spelled out. Support structures for implementing the plan are set in place.	The quality management plan is implemented through effective procedures in all areas of the unit. Everyone commits to implementing the plan aligned to the vision, mission, and values and beliefs. All share responsibility for accomplishing unit goals.	Unit-wide goals, mission, vision, and student learning standards are shared and articulated throughout the unit. The attainment of identified student learning standards is linked to the planning for and implementation of effective instruction that meets all students' needs. Leaders at all levels are developing expertise because planning is the norm.
Outcome	There is no evidence of comprehensive planning. Staff work is carried out in isolation. A continuum of learning for students is absent.	The unit understands the benefits of working together with all stakeholders to implement a comprehensive continuous improvement plan.	There is evidence that the special education plan is being implemented in some areas of the unit. Improvements are neither systematic nor integrated unit-wide.	A unit-wide plan is known to all. Results from working toward the quality improvement goals are evident throughout the unit. Planning is ongoing and inclusive of all stakeholders.	Evidence of effective teaching and learning results in the significant achievement of all students and can be attributed to quality planning at all levels of the unit organization. All teachers and administrators understand and share the unit mission and vision. Quality planning is seamless and evidence of accountability is demonstrated by all.

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PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

	One	Two	Three	Four	Five
Approach	The unit assumes no responsibility for providing professional learning for school and/or unit staff. Hierarchy determines “haves” and “have-nots.”	The “cafeteria” approach to professional learning is used, whereby individual staff members choose what they want to take, without regard to an overall district/special education unit plan.	The shared vision, district/special education unit plan, and needs of students with disabilities are used to target focused professional learning for all staff. Staff is trained on relevant instructional and leadership strategies.	Professional learning and data-gathering methods are used by all district/special education staff, and are directed toward the goals of the shared vision and the continuous improvement of the district/unit and schools. Teachers have ongoing conversations about student achievement data. All staff members receive training in teaching students with disabilities. Systems thinking is considered in all decisions.	Leadership and staff continuously improve all aspects of the learning organization through an innovative, data-driven, and comprehensive continuous improvement process that prevents student failures. Effective job-embedded professional learning is ongoing for implementing the vision for student success. Traditional teacher evaluations are replaced by collegial coaching and action research focused on student learning standards. Policies set professional learning as a priority budget line-item. Professional learning is planned, aligned, and leads to the achievement of student learning standards for all students.
Implementation	District/unit staff performance is controlled and inspected. Performance evaluations are used to detect mistakes.	District/unit staff professional learning is sporadic and unfocused, lacking an approach for implementing new procedures and processes. Some leadership training begins to take place.	The district/unit ensures that staff is involved in year-round quality professional learning. Stakeholders are trained in shared decision making, team building concepts, effective communication strategies, and data analysis.	District/unit staff, in teams, continuously set and implement student achievement goals. Leadership considers these goals and provides necessary support structures for collaboration. District/unit staff utilize effective support approaches as they implement new instruction and assessment strategies, particularly for students with disabilities. Coaching and feedback structures are in place. Use of new knowledge and skills is evident.	General education and special education teachers support each other in the pursuit of quality improvement at all levels. Teachers make bold changes in instruction and assessment strategies focused on student learning standards and student learning styles. A teacher as action researcher model is implemented. Staffwide conversations focus on systemic reflection and improvement. Teachers are strong leaders.
Outcome	No professional growth and no staff or student performance improvement exists. There is a high turnover rate of staff. Attitudes and approaches filter down to students.	The effectiveness of professional learning is not known or analyzed. Teachers feel helpless and unsupported in making unit-wide changes.	Teachers, working in teams, feel supported by the district/unit and begin to feel they can make changes. Evidence shows that shared decision making works.	A collegial relationship between the special education unit and its member schools is evident. Effective classroom strategies are practiced and articulated unit-wide. These strategies, focused on student learning standards, are reflective of professional learning aimed at ensuring the learning of students with disabilities and the implementation of the shared vision.	True systemic change and improved achievement of students with disabilities occur because all teachers are knowledgeable of and implement effective, differentiated teaching strategies for individual student learning gains. All teachers’ repertoire of skills is enhanced and students are achieving. General education and special education professional learning is unified and is driving learning at all levels.

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LEADERSHIP

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Approach	The Unit Director is decision maker. Decisions are reactive to state, district, and federal mandates. There is no knowledge of continuous improvement.	A shared decision-making structure is put into place and discussions begin on how to achieve a unit vision. Most decisions are focused on solving problems and are reactive.	Unit leadership is committed to continuous improvement. Leadership seeks inclusion of all stakeholders and supports topical study teams by making time provisions for their work.	Unit leadership represents a true shared decision-making structure. Study teams focus on the implementation of a comprehensive continuous improvement plan.	A strong continuous improvement structure is set into place that allows for input from all sectors of the school, district, and community, ensuring strong communication, flexibility, and refinement of approach and beliefs. The district/unit vision is student focused, based on data and appropriate for district/unit/school/ community values, and meeting student needs.
Implementation	The Unit Director makes all decisions, with little or no input from staff, administrators, teachers, the community, or students. Leadership inspects for mistakes.	District/unit values and beliefs are identified; the purpose of unit is defined; a unit mission is developed with representative input. A structure for studying approaches to achieving student learning standards for students with disabilities is established.	The district/unit leadership is active on study teams and integrates recommendations from the teams' research and analyses to form a comprehensive plan for continuous improvement within the context of the district/unit mission. Everyone is kept informed.	Decisions about budget and implementation of the vision are made with input from teams, the director, from leadership, from the individual schools, and from the full staff, as appropriate. All decisions are communicated to leadership and all staff.	The vision is implemented and articulated across all member districts and into feeder schools. Quality standards are reinforced throughout the unit. All members of the district/unit understand and apply the quality standards. Leadership has systematic interactions and involvement with district/ unit administrators, teachers, parents, community, and students about the unit's direction. Necessary resources are available to implement and measure staff learning related to student learning standards.
Outcome	Although the decision-making process is clearly known, decisions are reactive and lack focus and consistency. There is no evidence of staff commitment to a shared vision. Students and parents do not believe they are being heard.	The mission provides a focus for all unit improvement and guides the action to the vision. The special education unit is committed to continuous improvement. Quality leadership techniques are used sporadically.	The unit leadership is seen as committed to planning and quality improvement. Critical areas for improvement are identified. Staff is included in shared decision making. The special education unit begins working with member districts to unify continuous improvement plans.	There is evidence that the unit leadership listens to all levels of the organization. Implementation of the continuous improvement plan is linked to student learning standards and the guiding principles of the unit. Leadership capacity for implementing the vision among schools is evident. The special education unit and most member districts are committed to continuous improvement.	Site-based management and shared decision making truly exists. Teachers understand and display an intimate knowledge of how the district/unit operates. The unit and its member schools support and communicate with each other in the implementation of quality strategies, as outlined in unified continuous improvement plans. Teachers implement the vision in their classrooms and can determine how their new approaches meet all student needs and lead to the attainment of student learning standards. Leaders are standards-driven at all levels.

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PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

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Approach	There is no system for input from parents, agencies, or community. Status quo is desired for managing the special education unit.	Partnerships are sought, but mostly for money and things.	The unit has knowledge of why partnerships are important and seeks to include agencies and parents in a strategic fashion related to student learning standards for increased student achievement.	The unit seeks effective win-win partnerships with businesses, agencies, and the community, and meaningful parent involvement to implement the vision. Desired outcomes are clearly identified. A solid plan for partnership development exists.	Community, parent, business, and agency partnerships become integrated across all student groupings. The benefits of outside involvement are known by all. Parent and agency involvement in student learning is refined. Student learning <i>regularly</i> takes place beyond the school and district walls.
Implementation	Barriers are erected to close out involvement of outsiders and to preserve the status quo.	A team is assigned to develop partnerships and to receive input from parents, agencies, the community, and businesses in the unit.	Involvement of agencies, community, businesses, and parents begins to take place in some classrooms and after school hours related to the vision. Partners begin to realize how they can support each other in achieving unit goals. Unit staff members understand what partners need from the partnership.	There is systematic utilization of parents, community, businesses, and agencies unit-wide. Areas in which the active use of these partnerships benefit student learning are clear.	Partnership development is articulated across all student groupings. Parents, community, agencies, businesses, and educators work together in an innovative fashion to increase learning and to prepare all students for the future. Partnerships are evaluated for continuous improvement.
Outcome	There is little or no involvement of parents, agencies, or the community at-large. The unit is a closed, isolated system.	Much effort is given to establishing partnerships. Some spotty trends emerge, such as receiving donated equipment.	Some substantial gains are achieved in implementing partnerships. Some student achievement increases can be attributed to this involvement.	Gains in student satisfaction with learning and school are clearly related to partnerships. All partners benefit.	Previously non-achieving students enjoy learning with excellent achievement. The community, agencies, businesses, and home become common places for student learning, while school becomes a place where parents come for further education. Partnerships enhance what the unit does for students.

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CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT AND EVALUATION

	One	Two	Three	Four	Five
Approach	Neither goals nor strategies exist for the evaluation and continuous improvement of the special education unit.	The approach to continuous improvement and evaluation is problem solving. If there are no problems, or if solutions can be made quickly, there is no need for improvement or analysis. Changes in some aspects of the system are not coordinated with all other aspects.	Some aspects of the unit are evaluated for effectiveness. Some aspects are improved on the basis of the evaluation findings.	All aspects of the unit's operations are evaluated for improvement. Efforts are consistently made to ensure that every aspect of the unit is focused on student learning.	All aspects of the unit organization are rigorously evaluated and improved on a continuous basis. Students, and the maintenance of a comprehensive learning continuum for students, become the focus of all aspects of the unified special education unit/district improvement process.
Implementation	With no overall plan for evaluation and continuous improvement, strategies are changed by individual schools, teachers, and/or administrators only when something sparks the need to improve. Reactive decisions and activities are a daily mode of operation.	Isolated changes are made in some areas of the unit in response to problem incidents. Changes are not preceded by comprehensive analyses, such as an understanding of the root causes of problems. The effectiveness of the aspects of the special education unit is not known.	Aspects of the unit organization are improved on the basis of comprehensive analyses of root causes of challenges, stakeholder perceptions, and operational effectiveness of processes.	Continuous improvement analyses of student achievement and instructional strategies are rigorously reinforced within each classroom and across learning levels to develop a comprehensive learning continuum for students and to prevent student failure.	Unified and comprehensive continuous improvement becomes the way of doing business throughout the unit and its member districts. Teachers continuously improve the appropriateness and effectiveness of instructional strategies based on student feedback and performance. All aspects of the special education unit and member districts are improved to support teachers' efforts.
Outcome	Individuals struggle with system failure. Finger pointing and blaming others for failure occur. The effectiveness of strategies is not known. Mistakes are repeated.	Problems are solved only temporarily and few positive changes result. Additionally, unintended and undesirable consequences often appear in other parts of the system. Many aspects of the unit are incongruent, keeping the unit from reaching its vision.	Evidence of effective improvement strategies is observable. Positive changes are made and maintained due to comprehensive analyses and evaluation.	Teachers become astute at assessing and in predicting the impact of their instructional strategies on individual student achievement. Sustainable improvements in student achievement are evident at all grade levels due to continuous improvement supported by the unit.	The unit and member districts become a congruent and effective learning organization. Only instruction and assessment strategies that produce quality student achievement are used. A true continuum of learning results for all students and staff. The impact of improvements is increasingly measurable.